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COVER PICTURE: Olive Grove in Springtime



Editorial

THE WAR AGAINST Iraq must be causing many people to ask why it is happening. The governments of the coalition armies led by the United States of America and the United Kingdom seem to have been unable to fully convince the United Nations and many of their own countrymen of the necessity for their actions.

However one thing that does become noticeable when the subject is seriously discussed in the various media, is that the spotlight invariably turns round to focus on Israel. The earlier Gulf war in 1991 began when Iraq invaded Kuwait and then attacked Israel with Scud missiles. Saddam Hussein had sworn to destroy the nation of Israel and the present conflict is partly to defend Israel because the United States, their ally and protector, believed that Saddam was ready to attack Israel again.

Another reason is that the coalition governments see Iraq with its neighbours Syria and Iran, as countries supporting the training of terrorists such as those that destroyed the World Trade Centre in New York. Whether the attack on Iraq is a prelude to a wider armed conflict in the area remains to be seen. In the minds of many people, it is God's chosen nation, the Jews, who are to blame and that their occupation of the land of Israel is the cause of all the trouble in the Middle East.

We would recommend that our readers look carefully at the prophecies in the Bible that tell us why it is all happening. A number of the prophets of ancient Israel predicted that God's people would be scattered throughout the world; but they also foretold that they would be brought back to dwell again in their own land [*Jeremiah 30.10,11; Ezekiel 37.21-23*].

The 19th Century saw the beginnings of the return of Jewish people to their land which was then occupied by the Turks. This progressed at a faster rate when Palestine as it was then called, was under British rule. Despite the fierce opposition of the Arab world, a further fulfilment of these prophecies has been witnessed by our generation, when they were declared a nation by the United Nations in 1948 and became the State of Israel.

Jesus himself told us that this restoration of the Jewish people would certainly happen, but he then coupled this event with his own return to the earth. [*Luke 21.24-36*] The passage in Luke shows us that his second coming would be preceded by a time of trouble not seen before on this earth and the war in Iraq we believe is just part of the build up to this distressing epoch that heralds Christ's return.

Bible students should realise that God has said He will gather all nations to the land of Israel, for what can only be described as a final showdown, the battle of Armageddon [*Psalm 2; Ezekiel 38; Joel 3.14,16; Revelation 16.14,16*].

President Bush and Prime Minister Blair are now talking about having a 'road map' or a plan to sort out the Arab-Israeli problem. Without realising it the nations of the world are being drawn to the Middle East to play out the last stages of God's plan. God has had a road map printed out long ago for all to read - it is in the pages of the Bible but few have taken any notice or cared to read it.

We urge our readers to look at their Bibles with renewed interest to learn why these events are taking place in our world. The outcome will affect your future.

Technical Editor

For further information about this subject send for a free booklet entitled 'The Destiny of the Nations Divinely foretold' (address on inside back cover).

Where are you going?

THROUGHOUT THE WORLD one of the great growth industries is travel. In the UK the government is considering how it can provide additional runway capacity to meet anticipated future demand for air travel. Meanwhile many large cities face the problems associated with traffic congestion and the resulting pollution. In more rural parts of the world, such as the prairies of Canada or the steppes of Asia, people still travel many miles across land by train. Some still travel by more traditional means such as horseback or camel.



As we travel by car or bus, we sometimes comment that we know where we are going but we wonder where everyone else is heading. It does not seem to matter what time of the day or night - there is always someone else on the road.

Of course travelling is not a new phenomenon. From his earliest history man has travelled from one place to another. He did so to seek food, to escape from enemies or simply to explore new areas.

ABRAHAM'S JOURNEY

The Bible records various quite lengthy journeys in its early chapters. One of the earliest was that made by Abraham. He was told by God to leave Haran where he lived and to travel to a place that God would show him:

‘Now the LORD had said unto Abram, Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father’s house, unto a land that I will show thee’ [*Genesis 12.1*].

So Abraham started on a journey not knowing what his final destination would be. His journey started in what today is known as Iraq, and continued across the ‘fertile crescent’ through modern Syria, Lebanon and Israel down into Egypt. From there he returned to the land of Canaan (now Israel). This would have been a total distance in excess of 1600 miles. The journey would have been made on foot or on the back of an animal – there was no modern public transport available for Abraham!

Abraham made the journey because he trusted in God. Even though he did not know where God was taking him he was sure that it would be for his ultimate benefit. Indeed God had told him that this would be the case when he said:

‘And I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great; and thou shalt be a blessing; and I will bless them that bless thee, and curse him that curseth thee: and in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed’ [*Genesis 12.2,3*].

THE WILDERNESS JOURNEY

In the book of Exodus we find recorded the journeys of the children of Israel after they left Egypt. The Israelites had been harshly treated in Egypt. They had been forced to carry out hard labour - particularly the making of

bricks, under very harsh conditions. They pleaded to be released and to have their conditions improved.

Moses was chosen by God to lead the people and is told by God:

‘...ye shall know that I am the LORD your God, which bringeth you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians. And I will bring you in unto the land, concerning the which I did swear to give it to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob; and I will give it to you for an heritage: I am the LORD’ [Exodus 6.7,8].

The Israelites did not know at the time that their journey from Egypt to the land of promise would take some forty years. Having been released from Egypt by God, after He had inflicted plagues on the Egyptians, the people set out in hope of a better future in this land that was unknown to them. They started the journey but they did not know the destination. As with Abraham they had faith that God would bring good things to them at the end of the journey.

NEW TESTAMENT JOURNEYS

Other journeys are recorded in the New Testament. A familiar one is that made by Joseph and Mary from their home in Nazareth, southwards to Bethlehem, in order to take part in the census. This journey was made under difficult conditions as Mary was heavily pregnant. Yet Mary and Joseph made the journey in order to meet their legal obligations and also because they had faith that God would be with them. The journey was necessary to fulfil the Old Testament prophecy that Jesus would be born in Bethlehem [Micah 5.2].

The Apostle Paul also travelled far on his ‘missionary journeys’, as they have come to be called. In addition to much travel on foot he also travelled long distances by sea. In a letter that he wrote to the believers at Corinth he speaks of having been shipwrecked three times and of spending a day and a night ‘in the deep’ - that is afloat in the sea [2 Corinthians 11.25]. He also mentions the perils of robbers as he journeyed - a peril that still exists in many areas today.

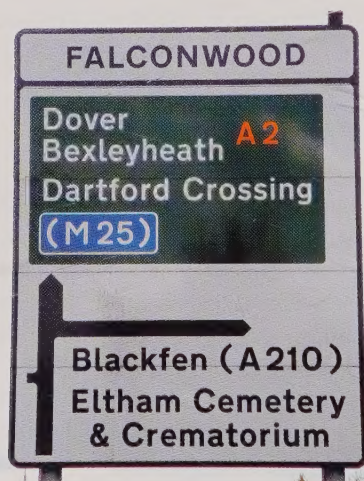
Clearly travel was still very difficult in the times of Paul, but he travelled

because he believed that he was carrying out the work of God. He believed that through his work he could bring great benefit to others.

Paul journeyed because he had confidence that Jesus Christ was the Saviour - the Messiah that had been promised for so long. That had not always been the case. In his earlier life Paul had not believed in Jesus - on the contrary, he had persecuted those who followed him and caused great terror among the Christians. It was on a particular journey as he travelled to Damascus, that Paul saw a vision from heaven and heard the voice of Jesus. He was literally stopped in his tracks and started on a new life.

THE BROAD WAY AND THE NARROW WAY

Paul would have been familiar with the teaching of Jesus when he spoke of service to him being a journey. Jesus used the example of travelling along two different routes. One of these routes was wide, straight and easy to find and follow. It appeared to be very attractive. It was a route followed by many people. The other route was much more difficult to find. It was a narrow winding road and only a few people chose to follow it.



The lesson of this teaching was in the destination that was being sought. The two routes led to different destinations. The broad and attractive way that attracted so many to it actually led to destruction. In contrast, the unattractive winding road led to life - but sadly, few found that way. This was what Jesus actually said:

‘Enter ye in at the strait gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat: because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it’ [Matthew 7.13,14].

Jesus was putting the two choices before us. We can ignore him and his teaching and enter the broad way and the end result will be our destruction. On the other hand we can like Paul, choose to put our trust in Jesus. But the way may not then seem as attractive for we will be entering through the narrow gate onto the winding road. Jesus commands us to put aside the things of the world that will lure so many to destruction.

If we choose to follow Jesus we may find that certain aspects of our lives seem more difficult. We must then follow the commandments of Jesus and that may mean we have to bring about a change in our lifestyle.

If we have been following the broad way it may come as something of a shock to turn onto the narrow winding road. It really depends what destination we want to try and reach. We could stay on that broad way enjoying all those things of today's world that pander to our tastes. We could call it the '*eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we die*' syndrome. Certainly that broad way will end in destruction for our rejection of Jesus will bar us from the gift of eternal life.

That is the difference if we follow the narrow way. The journey itself may be harder, the route being more difficult to find. However, when we reach the destination we will be glad that we rejected the broad way because we will have come to something that offers so much more to us. Paul summed it up in a letter he wrote to believers at Rome when he said:

'For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord' [*Romans 6.23*].

THE JOURNEY TO THE KINGDOM

Although the way of Jesus is a narrow one we have a very helpful guide to following it contained in the Word of God. The Bible must be our 'road atlas' if that is the route we choose to take. It is, in fact, our only reliable guide. If we follow it carefully and put its instructions into practice, then we should have relatively little difficulty following the route, as the Psalmist wrote:

'Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path' [*Psalms 119.105*].

During our daily lives many of us have to travel from one place to another. We need to get to work, to purchase food, to get children to school or perhaps to visit friends or relatives. For all these journeys we need to make appropriate arrangements. As we travel we encounter many other people also travelling but we do not know their planned destinations.

For each of us there is a much longer journey that should also be thought about. It is the journey through life. For many people there is little thought about the future - they take life as it comes. In the end there are just two destinations as we have seen in the words of Jesus. There is life and there is death.

There will be eternal life in the kingdom of God. This will be a time of peace and righteousness, a time when there will be no war or pain, no discrimination or victimisation, no famine or drought. It will be a complete contrast to the world of today.

The alternative is eternal death - to go to the grave with no future whatsoever except to gradually become just a pile of dust and be forgotten.

What will you choose for your journey through life?

Do you know where you are going?

John Hitches
Surrey, England

What did Jesus mean?

‘In my Father’s house are many mansions...’

THE DISCIPLES OF Jesus had experienced a challenging three years accompanying him on his travels, when Jesus comforted them with the words:

‘Let not your heart be troubled: ye believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father’s house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you’ [*John 14.1,2*].

At the beginning of that period, some of the disciples had left comfortable homes and regular employment to obey a call to follow Jesus. Others later declared their intention to become disciples too - until Jesus pointed out that they would be following a man who had no home of his own [*Luke 9.58*] and who depended on the generosity of others for many of his daily needs.

The disciples had accepted Jesus as the Messiah, who they rightly believed had been sent by God as a Saviour and would set up a kingdom on the earth in fulfilment of promises made to their ancient forefathers. The comforting words of Jesus were intended to reassure them and help them look forward to the day when, long after his death and resurrection and subsequent ascent into heaven, he would eventually return to the earth to fulfil that promise.

PREMATURE EXPECTATIONS

Towards the end of his three-year ministry, Jesus began to explain to the disciples, that instead of seizing power from the present rulers, he would soon be taken from them and cruelly put to death. Jesus knew that his death was a

vital part of his work as the Saviour and he was in just as much need of comfort as were the disciples.

The disciples were overwhelmed by the prospect. It would seem to them as if the whole mission of Jesus had fallen apart and that the fulfilment of those promises to the Jewish fathers was further away than ever. Peter even tried to tell Jesus that such a thing should not be allowed to happen [Mark 8.32,33] and later that he was ready to give his own life instead of Jesus [John 13.37,38].

And so, on an occasion that is only recorded by John, Jesus gently told the sorrowful disciples that the prospect of the Kingdom had not been destroyed. It was simply that their expectations were premature. What was happening was that his own role as the king over that Kingdom was still being prepared. The cross had to come before the crown. After his death, he would be raised again and then go away into heaven for a long time. Meanwhile his disciples would have to prepare themselves for his return.

TROUBLED HEARTS

Jesus knew that the disciples would be troubled for several reasons. Firstly, the forthcoming betrayal, trial and death of Jesus were dreadful events that would inevitably strike fear into their hearts.

Without doubt, the disciples would have wondered what would then happen to them. Would the Jewish leaders bring the Roman authorities against them as well as Jesus? Jesus therefore assured them with this word picture about a house. The Authorised Version says the house contains '*many mansions*'. The word '*mansions*' is the only place in the New Testament where the Greek word is translated in this way but the original meaning is somewhere to abide, dwell, continue or remain. The NIV translates it as '*many rooms*'.

It was an effective way of comforting the fearful disciples by giving them the prospect of security and permanence; something far more enduring than their existing homes which they would shortly return to. As yet, the disciples did not fully understand the need for the death and resurrection of Jesus. It was only when Jesus appeared to them after his resurrection, that they realised how many times the Jewish Scriptures had spoken not only of this future prospect, but also his death and resurrection as well.

OLD TESTAMENT PROPHECIES

One thing however, would have been clear to them. No Jew would have thought that the fulfilment of the promises to their forefathers and the kingdom of God, would be anywhere but on the earth. There are many passages which describe this future time and all of them speak quite plainly of a literal kingdom on the earth. For example, we read:

‘And it shall come to pass in the last days, that the mountain of the LORD’s house shall be established in the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills; and all nations shall flow unto it. And many people shall go and say, Come ye, and let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; and he will teach us of his ways, and we will walk in his paths: for out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem’. [*Isaiah 2.2,3*]

Some of this language is figurative; the term ‘*mountain*’ refers as much to a position of prominence as a literal mountain but there is no escaping the fact that Isaiah was talking about the real earth. A very similar prophecy is found in Micah chapter 4.

The Bible records the promise to Jacob who was one of the Jewish forefathers, the son of Isaac and grandson of Abraham. From him were descended the twelve tribes of Israel. This is what God said to Jacob:

‘...I am the LORD God of Abraham thy father, and the God of Isaac: the land whereon thou liest, to thee will I give it, and to thy seed; and thy seed shall be as the dust of the earth, and thou shalt spread abroad to the west, and to the east, and to the north, and to the south: and in thee and in thy seed shall all the families of the earth be blessed’ [*Genesis 28.13,14*].

THE NEW TESTAMENT

When Jesus was born, his mother Mary would have understood perfectly well what the angel was saying when she was told by the angel Gabriel:

‘He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Highest: and the Lord God shall give unto him the throne of his father David: and he shall reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there shall be no end’

[Luke 1.32,33].

She would have had no difficulty in understanding that these things would be fulfilled literally on the earth.

Early in his ministry, Jesus set out the qualities of the people who would eventually be rewarded with an inheritance in the Kingdom. ‘*Blessed are the meek*’ he said, ‘*for they shall inherit the earth*’ [Matthew 5.5]. Later on, he spoke of a judgement. The righteous would pass to the right side of the judge: ‘*Then shall the King say unto them on his right hand, Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world*’ [Matthew 25.34].

A TIME TO WAIT

However, although that kingdom was being prepared ‘*from the foundation of the world*’, there was to be a delay until the promise was ready for fulfilment. Jesus never said it would be fulfilled while he was with the disciples on the earth. He gave a long and detailed prophecy about the state of the world immediately prior to his return, from which we can recognise our own world centuries later (See Matthew chapter 24). He also told them a number of parables, which emphasised the need for them to prepare for his coming during a period when he was absent. Parables such as ‘The Ten Virgins’ and ‘The Talents’, both found in Matthew chapter 25, describe a time when the followers of Jesus would face the temptation of paying more attention to the affairs of this life than getting ready for the Kingdom.

JESUS WILL COME AGAIN

The disciples would have heard all these parables. However, even after the resurrection and after Jesus had cleared up the premature expectations they had, we find the disciples anxiously questioning him just as he was about to ascend into heaven: ‘*Lord, wilt thou at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel?*’ [Acts 1.6]. This time, Jesus was taken away before he could give the answer. He had gone. But the angels did give the answer for they said: ‘*Ye men of Galilee, why stand ye gazing up into heaven? this same Jesus, which*

is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as ye have seen him go into heaven' [Acts 1. 11].

The angels did not go on to say that when Jesus returned, he would then gather together his followers and take them back to heaven. Such a statement would have contradicted all that he had said in his ministry and all the things which the Old Testament Scriptures tell us so plainly about the kingdom of God. Neither does this contradict the statement which Jesus made about his Father's house. He said he would go and prepare a place for them and come again and receive them unto himself. We know from the Scriptures that the 'house' will be on the earth when the Kingdom is set up.

THE WAY TO THE HOUSE

The disciple Thomas then asked the question, which we must now answer, '*how can we know the way?*' [John 14.5]. The answer to this question can be found in the message that the disciples preached as they continued the ministry of Jesus after his ascension into heaven. They went forth, now as apostles with their understanding greatly improved, to preach the good news of Jesus' eventual return, and to proclaim how we can have an 'abiding place' in God's house. They talked about the resurrection of Jesus and of the need for a new way of life. They drew attention to the fact that David, the ancestor of Jesus, had not gone into heaven but expected to be in the Kingdom on the earth [Acts 2.29-36]. They reminded their Jewish hearers how foolish they had been to reject and crucify their Saviour whom God had sent them and yet God was still prepared to forgive them:

'Ye are the children of the prophets, and of the covenant which God made with our fathers, saying unto Abraham, And in thy seed shall all the kindreds of the earth be blessed. Unto you first God, having raised up his Son Jesus, sent him to bless you, in turning away every one of you from his iniquities' [Acts 3.25,26].

While Jesus is in heaven, he is 'preparing a place' for those who believe. He is a priest and a mediator between God and us. These are things that apply to us today, for the promises given to the Jewish fathers have been extended to everyone. It requires commitment from us and like the disciples, it may be a difficult decision to leave behind present comforts and apparent

security. But it makes no difference who we are or where we come from. There is no 'respecting of persons' or discrimination so far as the Gospel is concerned. The Apostle Paul told the believers in Galatia and Rome that the only criteria is that we believe and are baptised into Jesus, confessing our sins and resolving to obey God in our lives [*Romans chapter 6; Galatians 3.26-29*].

THE HOUSE COMPLETE

In their later letters, the apostles continued to use the term 'house' to refer to the community of faithful believers who will inherit the kingdom of God:

'Now therefore ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellowcitizens with the saints, and of the household of God; and are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone; in whom all the building fitly framed together groweth unto an holy temple in the Lord: In whom ye also are builded together for an habitation of God through the Spirit' [*Ephesians 2.19-22*].

This tells us that, not only will the faithful have an 'abiding place' in God's house but they would also be part of the spiritual house where God would dwell. This was a concept which David had very clearly in his mind [*2 Samuel 7.12-29; 1 Kings 8. 15-20*]. The same things are confirmed by the Apostle Peter in his first epistle. [*1 Peter 2.1-10*]

And so, far from being misled by ideas that faithful believers will be taken away into heaven to receive a reward of which the Bible tells us nothing, Jesus has told us that he is making our future inheritance on the earth certain, if we believe the Gospel preached to the Jewish forefathers. God will establish his 'house' on the earth, in conditions that are clearly described and we can dwell in it forever.

Alan Wharton
Surrey, England



Bible Cities

CORINTH

THE PRESENT DAY Greek town of Korinthos can be found about 50 miles (80 kilometres) to the west of Athens, at the eastern end of the Gulf of Corinth. It is situated on the Isthmus of Corinth, a narrow land bridge that connects the Peloponnese to central Greece. The remains of the ancient Biblical city of Corinth are nearly 5 kilometres to the southwest of the modern town on a raised terrace area about 90 metres above sea level. The ruined city is spread around the 575 metres high flat-topped mountain called the Acrocorinthus on which stood a citadel that commanded the whole area.

It is reckoned that the site has been occupied from about 3,000 BC. Not much is known of its history until the 8th century BC when the city-state of Corinth developed as a commercial centre. The city's strategic location and the trade that passed through there, made it the target over the centuries of a number of conquests, until in 146 BC the Romans completely destroyed it as their empire expanded winning more and more territory.

The Greek Empire eventually gave way completely to the Roman Empire and later when Julius Caesar became Emperor, he realised the importance of the position of Corinth and in 44 BC he decided to establish it as a Roman colony. This new colonial settlement brought a wide variety of people to live there.

Many of the new inhabitants were freed slaves, captives from many countries, along with others seeking a better life and fresh opportunities. With this mixture of races and cultures the new colony quickly prospered and later became the administrative capital of the Roman province of Achaia. In many respects Corinth was the most important city in Greece under the Roman Empire.

While Athens was the educational centre, with the greatest university in the world at that time, Corinth as the capital of the province, became the heart of government and development in the country, with Gallio the Roman proconsul who ruled Achaia residing there. [Acts 18.12] The time of Gallio's appointment in Corinth is reliably dated as AD 51-53 by an inscription discovered in 1905 at Delphi.

Ancient Corinth was unique in that it had two ports, one called Cenchrea to the south on the Saronic Gulf and the other north at Lecheum on the Corinthian Gulf. Today a canal cuts through the narrow strip of land that separated these two harbours. In earlier times, before there was a canal, trade flowed across this neck of land by a road (a *diolkos*), the remains of which can still be seen there today. The cargoes of the larger ships were unloaded and transported over this route to save a dangerous sea journey but smaller vessels were taken out of the water fully loaded and manhandled on rollers over this road from one port to the other.

The Emperor Nero actually started work to cut a canal between the two ports in AD 67 using Jewish slave labour, prisoners from the Judaeian revolt of AD 66. However French and Greek engineers did not construct the present canal until more recent times, starting work in 1881 and completing it in 1893.

It was in the 1st Century AD that Corinth became a **biblical city** by reason of the fact that the Apostle Paul came to Corinth around AD 51 on the second of his missionary journeys, fulfilling the command personally given to him by Jesus to '*bear my name before Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel*' [Acts 9.15 NKJV]. The arrival of Paul in this city with its teeming multi-racial population of around five hundred thousand, certainly gave Paul the opportunity to put into effect the directive he had been given as we read in Acts: '*After these things Paul departed from Athens and went to Corinth. And he found a certain Jew named Aquila, born in Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla (because Claudius had commanded all the Jews to depart from Rome); and he came to them. So, because he was of the same trade, he stayed with them and worked; for by occupation they were tentmakers. And he reasoned in the synagogue every Sabbath, and persuaded both Jews and Greeks*' [Acts 18.1-4 NKJV].

Paul stayed in Corinth for a year and a half and the effect of his preaching led to the conversion of a number of people in the city: *'Then Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue, believed on the Lord with all his household. And many of the Corinthians, hearing, believed and were baptized' [Acts 18.8 NKJV].*

The turning of numerous citizens of Corinth to Christ, led to the setting up of a Christian church in the city, comprising people of many races, cultures and religions, some no doubt rescued from the very dregs of society. This meant that its members were not without problems, as the two letters that Paul had cause to write to them later bear witness. They also tell us a lot about what life was like in Corinth in those times. Some of the things that affected the early church were caused by the deplorable moral standards in Corinth. The city had gained a reputation for vice and depravity throughout the Roman Empire. It was so bad that to call a person a 'Corinthian' was an insult; the word referred to 'gross immorality'.

The various forms of pagan worship practised in Corinth contributed to the corrupt way of life. As an example, the temple of Aphrodite, the goddess of love that stood on top of the Acrocorinth had as many as a thousand priestesses or temple prostitutes, whose services were available to all-comers. The money generated by these depraved practices is said to have contributed greatly to the city's wealth. It was in these surroundings, together with the pagan rituals associated with idol worship, that the early church had to struggle to survive.

Paul had to rebuke the members there for tolerating a case of immorality in their midst, insisting that they expel the culprits from their community. He also had to advise them on the question of eating meat that had been offered to idols. The residue of this meat from the pagan temples that was probably of the best quality, ended up for sale in the '*shambles*', or butchers shops in Corinth and those church members who had converted from paganism and idol worship, were upset by others in the brotherhood who were buying and eating it. All these things that Paul had to write about tell us something of the life and culture of Corinth [*1 Corinthians 10.25-33*].

Besides its commercial importance, Corinth was famous as the scene of the great Isthmian Games which were held there every two years. This event was very popular, second only to the Olympic games. The festival was

dedicated to the sea god Poseidon and attracted large audiences who watched the athletic and musical competitions that took place. It is possible that some of the members of the church were at one time associated with the games, either as organisers or contestants. If not, many of them would have witnessed the training and the efforts of the athletes.

Paul in his letters, uses the examples of the runner and the boxer, their disciplined way of life and dedication, as an ideal for the follower of Christ. At the same time he pointed out that the competitors did this to obtain the victory prize, a laurel wreath, a corruptible crown. He compares all this striving and effort with the Christian's way of life and the more worthwhile reward of eternal life offered to them [*1 Corinthians 9.24-27*].

The influence and growth of Christianity in Corinth is shown by the fact that the Isthmian games and its associated pagan celebrations had died out by the fourth century AD. Unfortunately as the Roman Empire from the time of the Emperor Constantine, adopted Christianity as the official religion, a gradual process also set in to corrupt true Christianity with some of the pagan rituals and beliefs. This falling away from the first century teaching of Christ and the apostles affected the Corinthian church as much as it did the others, until the original doctrines were almost lost and held by only a few believers.

As for Corinth itself, an earthquake destroyed the ancient city in 521 AD. The area has over the course of time, been occupied by many conquerors. The city declined in importance, eventually being reduced to a country town. The ruins of the city began to come to the notice of the modern world when archaeological excavations began in 1896 revealing the culture and lost splendour of a city that was once graced by the presence of that faithful teacher of God's Word, the Apostle Paul.

Ken Dennis
Kent, England

Women of Faith

Esther

IF THERE IS one book in the Bible that stands out as being 'different' from all others, it is the book of Esther which is about the life of a remarkable Jewish woman. The book is also unique in the Bible for not directly referring to God although we understand that the Hebrew name of God, YHWH, is hidden within its text.

Today, the preserved record of Esther is a reminder that God oversees the affairs of men and turns around situations to further His glorious purpose with the earth. This event is still remembered by the Jewish people and celebrated as the Feast of Purim or the Feast of Lots. This record is not only filled with courage and loyalty but also with deceit and treachery, yet ultimately it is a story of victory for God's people the Jews.

KING XERXES

The book of Esther is found in the Old Testament between the books of Nehemiah and Job and was probably written in the 5th century BC.

The narrative is set in Persia (modern day Iran) during the reign of King Xerxes (Hebrew name Ahasuerus) in the capital Susa. King Xerxes ruled over 127 provinces stretching from India to Cush (the upper Nile region). In the first chapter of the book of Esther, we read of King Xerxes riches: *'There were couches of gold and silver on a mosaic pavement of porphyry marble, mother-of-pearl and other costly stones. Wine was served in goblets of gold, each one different from the other; and the royal wine was abundant in keeping with the king's liberality.'* [Esther 1.6,7 NIV] It would seem that Xerxes was indeed a very generous host and a very powerful king.

The record then tells us that Xerxes held a huge banquet for all his court nobles. After a period of 180 days of feasting, an additional feast of seven days was made for the entire population of the king's domain. On the seventh day of this party, the king ordered Vashti the queen to appear before him wearing her crown and exhibiting her beauty. Vashti refused to comply with Xerxes request [*Esther 1.3-12*].

It could be presumed that this woman was very upright, modest and dignified, such character most befitting her royal position. For her to appear wearing her crown before those who had been drinking, would have demeaned her position as the queen. Her refusal to appear before the king is met with anger and she is immediately banished from the palace. A decree goes forth that Vashti is never to enter the palace of King Xerxes again and the position of queen be given to someone else [*Esther 1.15-19*].

We should at this point recall just how despotic these rulers of old were - they literally had the power of life and death. The death sentence could be passed if anybody disobeyed the royal command. Instead of death, Vashti was banished from the royal court. Sometime later when the anger of King Xerxes had passed, it was decreed that a search be made for a new and suitable queen for the king. All the young and beautiful maidens were brought to the king's palace [*Esther 2.1-4*].

ESTHER

Living close by to the palace was a Jew named Mordecai, of the tribe of Benjamin who had been taken into exile from Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar King of Babylon, along with Jehoiachin king of Judah [*Esther 2.5*]. Mordecai had a cousin named Hadassah, a Jewess, who had become his responsibility due to the fact that both her parents had died during the exile to Babylon.

When the edict went out from King Xerxes, Hadassah (whose name was changed to the Persian name Esther) along with other maidens, was taken to the king's palace, to a eunuch named Hegai [*Esther 2.8*] who showed particular kindness to Esther and gave her special food and beauty aids. He assigned to her seven maids from the king's palace who looked after Esther and all her needs. It should be noted that at this time, the nationality of Esther had not been revealed, as her cousin Mordecai had forbidden it.

ESTHER BECOMES QUEEN

After twelve months of preparation Esther was presented to King Xerxes and found favour in his eyes and was subsequently chosen to succeed the deposed Vashti as queen. A holiday was proclaimed and royal gifts distributed [*Esther 2.18*]. It is at this point in the narrative that intrigue, treachery and corruption become apparent.

Two of the King's ministers, Bigthana and Teresh plot to kill him but Mordecai learns of this and reports it to the king. Eventually the two traitors are tried and hanged and Mordecai gains favour with Xerxes [*Esther 2.21,22*]. All seems to be going well for Esther and her cousin Mordecai, but events are soon to take a turn for the worse.

HAMAN

There was an Agagite by the name of Haman residing at King Xerxes palace, who had his position elevated to a seat of great honour, greater than any of the nobles in the land [*Esther 3.1*]. All who passed him would bow before him, paying him great honour but Mordecai refused to honour Haman in this way [*Esther 3.2*]. Haman became angry at Mordecai's reluctance to pay him homage and eventually found out that he was of the Jewish faith. Haman vowed to destroy not just Mordecai, but the entire population of Jews living throughout Persia.

In order to bring this about, Haman persuaded the king that the Jewish people were a threat to him and he agreed that Haman should deal with them. Lots (Hebrew 'pur') were cast to determine a day for the carrying out of Haman's decree of destroying the Jews and the lot fell on the 13th of the month Adar. News of the decree spread throughout the Kingdom and all Jews were greatly distressed. When Mordecai learned of the edict he tore his clothes, *'put on sackcloth and ashes, and went out into the city, wailing loudly and bitterly'* [*Esther 4.1 NIV*].

Esther learnt of Mordecai's distress and urged one of the palace eunuchs, Hathach, to find out why Mordecai was so upset. Esther was told that she too would not be spared from Haman's wrath and she sent word to Mordecai that they all should fast. Afterwards she would go to the King and plead for the lives of all Jews living in the land. She knew that by doing this

her life was in danger and she sent this message to Mordecai: *'I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish'* [Esther 4.16 NIV].

The courage of Queen Esther in the face of great danger, eventually brings triumph. King Xerxes spares her life and all the Jews living under his rule; the wicked and deceitful Haman is hanged upon the gallows that he had erected for Mordecai. Instead of the Jews being destroyed they are given great blessings and a time of feasting and celebration is allowed for the destruction of their enemy Haman. Mordecai declares that for all generations to come, the 14th and 15th days of the month Adar are to be days of rejoicing and feasting.

The story of Esther is one of great courage and faith and there are many deep and hidden meanings in each chapter; let us look briefly at some of them. It was mentioned earlier that the name of Esther had been changed. The Hebrew name given to her was **'Hadassah'** which means **'myrtle'** but her name was changed to the Persian name **'Esther'**.

Now many believe that this name has the meaning of beauty and originated from the goddess Ishtar or Astarte, who personified to the Persians, physical beauty. The name Ishtar itself is originally derived from 'Istahar' and means a very bright star. Yet some commentators may be unaware that the nickname of 'Esther' in the Hebrew tongue, means 'hidden,' and that the great things of God were definitely hidden within the pages of this remarkable book. God's 'hidden' hand directing His people to carry out His plan that would eventually, some 500 years later, be centred in one who was far from hidden, but whose life shone forth like the *'bright and morning star'*; the Lord Jesus Christ.

At this time in God's timetable, it was Esther who became the *'bright star'* that the Jewish people needed in their darkest hour. As God's plan for both Esther, her cousin Mordecai and all the Jews living at that time unfolded, it will be seen that God was indeed 'hidden' in everything that happened. As events unfolded, the unseen hand of the Almighty was clearly manifested in the lives of His chosen servants.

FINDING HIDDEN TREASURES IN GOD'S WORD

As we read God's Word, we will observe that there are many parallel accounts recorded in its pages for our attention and consideration. Many of the characters whose lives are recorded in the Bible seem to have much in common with each other. Perhaps their lives are mirrored in some way, and each account may contain information that is almost identical in type and substance. We would like to draw your attention to the following, which we hope will convince you the reader, that although God's name is not evident in the story of Esther, God indeed is the author of this most remarkable book.



Esther before Ahasuerus from a painting by Bernardo Cavallino

MIRRORED LIVES

The life of Esther and her uncle, Mordecai, mirror two other famous lives recorded in the Biblical record. Firstly we might like to consider the life of Joseph compared with that of Esther. Joseph is sold in Egypt, whilst Esther

is taken to King Xerxes' palace in Persia. They both ascend to power in dramatic ways. Both help their people Israel and save them from destruction (famine and execution.) Both of the Gentile rulers also benefit from their assistance - Joseph saves Pharaoh from famine and Mordecai saves Xerxes from assassination.

Both the stories of Joseph and Esther have a number of similarities. Concerning Joseph we read: *'Then Pharaoh took his signet ring from his finger and put it on Joseph's finger' [Genesis 41.42,43 NIV]*. In the book of Esther we also read that, *'The king took off his signet ring, which he had reclaimed from Haman, and presented it to Mordecai' [Esther 8.2 NIV]*. Again our minds are directed to the fact that although the name of God is absent from the book of Esther, God indeed was very present in all the dealings He had with His people the Jews.

In each account, Joseph and Esther attract attention because of their physical attributes but ultimately because of their characters which pleased God. Joseph interprets dreams and devises and implements a daring economic strategy. Esther also finds a way of convincing the king. Both accounts include sadness and misfortune and both persons do not reveal their identity until the end. Again, we see the hand of God at work in the lives of His beloved servants.

JESUS, MORDECAI AND ESTHER

Now we will briefly look at the second of our parallel lives, the Lord Jesus Christ. Esther physically saved her people, the Jews, at this point in their history. Little did she know that almost 500 years later, the fulfilment of the prophetic words given by God to Abraham and later to David, would draw near with the birth, life and death of the Lord Jesus Christ. The book of Genesis refers to the line through which the Lord Jesus Christ would come *[Genesis 22.15-18]*.

Jesus was the 'greater Mordecai,' a 'saviour' to his people. Jesus was condemned to die for his people, the Messiah who became a supreme sacrifice, an atonement for the sins of both Jews and Gentiles. The following points compare the lives of Esther, Mordecai, and the Lord Jesus Christ:

- Esther fasted for three days, and on the third day she arose and came before the King and stood in the inner court of the palace

[*Esther 4.15-5.1*]. Jesus after three days in the grave, was resurrected to newness of life; he arose and appeared before his King, the Lord God of heaven and earth [*Luke 24.1-9*].

Esther put on royal robes and stood in the inner court of the palace. [*Esther 5.1*] Jesus Christ had cast off his old clothes of mortality and put on clean garments, robes of immortality. He was able to go into the inner sanctuary, signifying even heaven itself [*Hebrews 9.1-25*].

The King extended the royal sceptre to Esther. This signified that she was indeed worthy to be in his presence [*Esther 5.2*]. In the book of Genesis we read: *'The sceptre will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet'* [*Genesis 49.10 NIV*]. This prophecy uttered by the Patriarch Jacob, related to the future birth of the Messiah, Jesus Christ, who indeed would one day be king over the whole earth and who will set up God's kingdom upon earth [*Hebrews 1.8,9*].

Haman the Agagite symbolised sin in the flesh and was exposed by Mordecai. Jesus Christ overcame sin in the flesh and triumphed by his sinless life and his resurrection from the grave. Jesus 'exposed' sin and successfully nailed it to the tree by his sacrificial death.

CONCLUSION

The book of Esther is a record of failings, weaknesses, faith in God, courage and victory. The main characters were very real and important people selected by God to bring about the furtherance of His plan for His chosen people, Israel.

Throughout the whole of the Bible, it becomes apparent that if man does not live by the commandments and statutes of God, then he will turn to his own ways and those ways only lead to destruction, *'There is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to death'* [*Proverbs 14.12 NIV*].

Esther trusted in the God of Israel and was preserved. She lived out her life with great blessings as did her cousin, Mordecai. As for those who opposed the ways of God, the end was bitter indeed. Haman sought to rid

the land of all Jews, as have many powerful men throughout history. Yet we know through the Bible record that God's people, the Jewish nation, are His chosen, *'the apple of his eye'* [Zechariah 2.8] and they cannot be completely annihilated.

God has a special purpose for His people the Jews and when His kingdom is set up on earth with Jesus ruling from the capital Jerusalem, then Israel will have an honoured place amongst the nations [Romans 11.25-27]. The Jews will no longer be hated or reviled [Deuteronomy 28.37] but will be honoured when at last they recognise their Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ [Zechariah 12.10].

When this happens, it will herald an age of unprecedented peace and prosperity for the whole world [Micah 4. 1-5] and the land of Israel, along with all the surviving inhabitants, will be able to say with real conviction that, *'their sorrow was turned into joy and their mourning into a day of celebration'* [Esther 9.22 NIV].

Ray Dixon
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The ruins of Corinth (see page 15)



From our Mail Bag

IS IT APPROPRIATE for a follower of Christ to marry? This is a recurring question posed by many readers of Light Magazine. It is one which many of us must have pondered, at least when initially embarking on our journey towards God's kingdom.

The guidance laid down for us is arguably conflicting. The Apostle Paul wrote to the 1st Century believers at Corinth: *'Now concerning the things whereof ye wrote unto me: It is good for a man not to touch a woman' [1 Corinthians 7.1].*

What do we make of this statement? It certainly implies we shouldn't marry. In fact it is rendered in the NIV as *'It is good for a man not to marry.'* However, the next verse goes on to say: *'Nevertheless, to avoid fornication, let every man have his own wife, and let every woman have her own husband' [1 Corinthians 7.2].*

God, recognizing our weak nature, has given us a choice on this matter. We may marry for human reasons. Although, this statement is qualified by the Apostle Paul:

'I say therefore to the unmarried and widows, It is good for them if they abide even as I. But if they cannot contain, let them marry: for it is better to marry than to burn' (to burn with passion – NIV) [1 Corinthians 7.8,9].

In these two verses Paul tells us that it is better not to marry but if celibacy is difficult for us then it is better to marry than to resort to fornication. It is better for us to remain unmarried in order to devote our lives more fully to serving God.

But what of Christ's views on this matter? When questioned by his disciples on the related issue of divorce his reply was very similar to the words of Paul: *'For some are eunuchs because they were born that way: others were made that way by men; and others have renounced marriage because of the kingdom of heaven. The one who can accept this should accept it'* [Matthew 19.12 NIV].

The foregoing may imply that marriage is a 'bad thing'. Far from it, for we read in the first book of the Bible that God instituted the concept of marriage with Adam and Eve: *'Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh'* [Genesis 2.24].

Most of the prominent Old Testament figures were married. In fact Isaac was instructed by God to take a wife: *'Behold, Rebekah is before thee, take her, and go, and let her be thy master's son's wife, as the LORD hath spoken'* [Genesis 24.51].

So, is it appropriate for a follower of Christ to marry? The Scriptural answer is 'yes'. However, we do have a choice - to remain single and devote our lives to God or to marry and try to devote our lives to God given the other distractions that are inevitable with that status. On the surface of it these are simple choices. The former being by far the simpler but only if you are of a disposition to cope with it, therefore the more difficult. The latter is the easier choice but certainly the more complex.

Finally and most importantly, marriage is used in the Bible to symbolise the relationship that exists between Christ (the bridegroom) and the believers (his bride in prospect) [Ephesians 5.22-33]. This is a pattern for the perfect harmony that will exist when the true bride of Christ is united with him at his second coming to establish the kingdom of God on earth [Revelation 19.7-9].

Correspondence Editor

The Christadelphians (Dawn Fellowship) believe the Bible (Old and New Testaments) to be the wholly inspired and infallible Word of God. Its principal theme is the salvation of mankind through the saving work of the Lord Jesus Christ and the setting up of the kingdom of God under his rulership when he returns to the earth.

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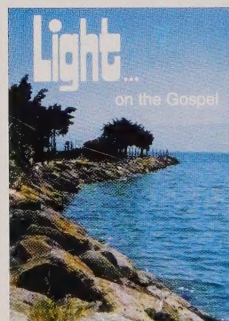
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